

Town Administrator 2005 Annual Report

To the Citizens of Ashburnham and the Honorable Board of Selectmen, I submit to you the following on behalf of the Town Administrator's Office.

It is my pleasure to submit this report to the Board of Selectmen and the citizens of Ashburnham for the year 2005. I was honored to assume the position of Town Administrator on July 1, 2005 replacing the very capable and professional Interim Town Administrator Norm Thidemann. Mr. Thidemann served the Town for six months and provided the community with high-quality management during a difficult time. I am grateful that Mr. Thidemann left an organized and efficient office of the Town Administrator, making the transition process relatively easy.

It was an exceptionally busy six months since there were so many projects in need of immediate attention. Highlights of this work are organized topically below.

Public Buildings

The Public Safety Building Project design was completed in September 2005, and publicly bid during the months of October and November. Unfortunately, delays of nearly a year during the design process, and unprecedented energy cost escalation, caused the low project bid to be \$2.4 million over the amount approved by Town Meeting. By year's end, plans were being finalized for a January 2006 Special Town Meeting and Election, seeking the additional funding and further to exempt the additional cost from the provisions of Prop 2½.

The Town Hall Project was originally scheduled to not begin until 2007, when staff from Town Hall would relocate to the VMS Building after the Public Safety Building was complete and Police/Fire staffs moved to their new building.

After opening the Public Safety Building bids however, it became apparent that construction cost escalation might put the original scope of the Town Hall Project in jeopardy. By year's end, the committee was meeting and reviewing options to advance the project and begin construction sometime in 2006.

In the fall of 2005, it was finally recognized that the Highway Garage was in desperate need of relocation. Impact in the residential neighborhood, unacceptable environmental impacts, and aesthetic concerns all led to the inevitable conclusion. It was also noted that the various highway, parks, water/sewer personnel and equipment really should be organized into a Department of Public Works function.

The Department of Public Works will allow future growth in these departments to be logical and efficient, avoiding costly duplication of staffing and equipment. By year's end the organization and creation of a DPW, along with a DPW relocation study were both well underway and scheduled for reporting to the spring, 2006 Annual Town Meeting.

Public Works

In the summer of 2005, the Page's Beach water main grant had been disapproved by the State but the Town was invited to take advantage of the Secretary's Discretionary Grant Program.

Funding through this program was reduced below the original grant, and substantial work remained to complete the income survey work required to qualify for the grant program. An excellent group of people was assembled including Ms. Shelly Hatch from MRPC and Ms. Jill Anderson and Ms. Sandy LaPointe from the Page's Beach area. This group, with assistance from several others, completed the survey work just in time, trimmed the project budget to meet grant guidelines, and in the fall of 2005 received official word that the grant had been awarded in the amount of \$651,789.

Bids for construction were solicited, and the fall Special Town Meeting gave permission for required Town matching funds to be issued on a "betterment" basis, (i.e. the Town "fronts" the project funds, and area residents pay those funds back over time), and the project was scheduled for construction in the spring of 2006. Thanks are due to many people for the ultimate securing of the grant, however, Senator Brewer and Selectman Ron Reed's tireless efforts to keep this project moving despite endless delays are preeminent, as are the three persons previously mentioned.

Thanks to their collective efforts, and many other people as well, the residents of Page's Beach can finally look forward to an uninterrupted supply of clean, safe drinking water.

Another project in crisis in the summer of 2005 was the gasoline contamination of dozens of private water supplies in the Boutwell's Garage area. A series of meetings, held with all effected parties, state and local officials, revealed an unusual funding opportunity that might pay for an extension to the Town's water distribution system to the effected area.

A unique partnership between the Boutwell family, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Town, makes possible access to the so-called 21J Water Pollution Abatement Fund. By year's end, continued exploration of this opportunity was under way and looked extremely promising. Once again, Town officials, led by Chairman of the Board of Selectmen Jonathan Dennehy, Selectman Mark Carlisle, Board of Health Chair Glenn Hathaway and Senator Brewer, made a persuasive case for state funding and created the opportunity to resolve this long-standing issue.

Personnel

Upon assuming the position of Town Administrator it became quickly obvious that the Town's personnel system was dysfunctional. Employees in the same job positions were paid differently, benefits were not standardized and pay rates were not competitive with neighboring communities leading to our inability to attract qualified candidates to job postings and to high turn-over among active employees.

The October 12, 2005 STM provided funds to undertake a non-union employee pay plan, and an intern was hired to conduct benefits and wage surveys with other communities.

In addition, a Committee was appointed to work with my office to completely review the Non-Union Personnel By-law in time to be presented to the spring, 2006 ATM.

At year's end 2005 all projects were underway and on schedule for completion in 2006.

All three labor contracts with the Town for Police Officers, Firefighters/EMT's and Civilian Dispatchers will expire next year and thus negotiations were opened in 2005 with all three unions. Excellent progress has been made toward completion of these contracts and work will conclude before the 2006 ATM.

The long-standing labor dispute between Police Sgt. Brennan and the Town was successfully resolved with the approval of a confidential settlement Agreement between the parties.

The relationship between the Town and the Library Directors has for some time now been characterized by confusion regarding staff supervision and library finances. Significant research was conducted and a lengthy memo written that outlines the history of the relationship compares that to Mass. Statutes, Town Charter and local by-law, and sets the framework for the writing of a comprehensive Agreement formalizing the relationship so there is clarity regarding roles and responsibilities between the parties.

New employee hires during 2005 included new Police Chief Loring Barrett, Council-on-Aging Director, Mary-Lee Muessel, Town Planner Eric Smith, and Conservation Agent Lori Capone.

In addition one new Firefighter/EMT position and a new Police Officer position were both filled this year with the hiring of Officer Omar Connor and Firefighter/Paramedic Alexandra Bergeron.

A second Police Sgt. Position was established at the ATM and after an extensive process Police Officer Todd Parsons from our own Police Department was promoted to the new position.

Finally, Collector-Treasurer Paul Pollastri retired after 20 years of service to the Town. Paul's outstanding work for the Town will be sorely missed.

With the Town's need for financial administration growing, along with the community itself, the position of Treasurer and Collector was split at the end of 2005.

Carla Clifford, the assistant Collector for many years was promoted to the position of Collector, and Anne Cervantes of Templeton, Mass. was appointed to the position of Treasurer after an extensive recruitment process.

The process of filling all of these positions consumed many hours of time and the help of many citizens and employees. While space constraints do not allow each to be listed here, the gratitude of the Town is sincerely felt. Without the help of these fine people it would not have been possible to recruit the extremely well qualified individuals that were hired.

It is also a pleasure to note that so many of our promotional opportunities were filled by existing employees. There is no clearer way to establish the quality of our employees than to see them promoted through a competitive process that include many candidates from outside the Town.

It is also particularly noteworthy that the Police Chief recruitment process was one of the most thorough and exhaustive processes I have ever seen in public service. Candidates were recruited from all-over the Commonwealth and the fact that Chief Barrett was the successful candidate is a testimony to his outstanding qualifications.

Information Technology

During 2005 several important advances were made in the area of IT.

A detailed analysis of the Town's computers was completed and many were replaced due to age and lack of state-of-the-art features.

Internet access and e-mail capability, formally available at only one Town Hall work station was made available to all Town Hall employees.

The Town lacked a Home Page of any sort. Thanks to the help of Mr. Ken Dolder, who was appointed to the position of Ashburnham's first Webmaster, a website was developed and quickly filled with board/committee meeting minutes and other important Town information. Using the website to its fullest potential will be an on-going prospect for all departments. But with the work completed thus far, Ashburnham has formally entered the "21st IT Century" and we now have limitless possibilities to use this important new tool for the benefit of our citizens.

The October 12, 2005 STM approved funds to research and write the Town's first 5-year IT plan. This plan will show us ways to better use existing IT equipment and it will become the blueprint for future connection of all Town departments into a single IT environment. That evolution will produce great opportunities for efficiencies in information sharing as well as savings of tax dollars in the future.

Financial Issues

The Town finds itself in better financial shape than many of our neighbors thanks to past Selectmen/Advisory Board and Administrators prudent practices.

A few opportunities were discovered that will have the effect of strengthening our finances even further.

First, software to automate and modernize our water/sewer utility billing was purchased and installation begun in 2005. This project will not be completed until 2006 but offers the opportunity to greatly increase department revenues with better collection ratios and the elimination of several areas of critique in our last annual audit.

New practices in the areas of revenue and expense forecasting, capital budgeting, bid specification writing, annual departmental budget tracking, and an entirely new purchasing policy were begun.

Each of these changes addresses a financial weakness of some sort and each will help make our already strong financial structure even sounder.

In preparing the annual operating and capital budgets for the next fiscal year, as we neared the end of 2005 I had the distinct pleasure of working with the Town's Advisory Board. This excellent group of individuals, led by Chairman John Hyslop, plays a largely unseen but critical role in monitoring and reviewing all financial practices of the Town. I have found them to be trusted and highly qualified partners in that regard and their service to the Town is exemplary.

Community Planning

Working with our new Town Planner Eric Smith and with the excellent leadership of the Planning Board and its Chair John McMillan, the Town has begun to review its community development needs.

An Affordable Housing Committee was appointed in the latter part of 2005 and began its work of trying to create affordable housing opportunities for Town residents. This project may take many forms, and the precise recommendations will not be made for some time, but the fact that this work has formally begun is an exciting development for the Town, and especially seniors and our youth who find it difficult to remain in Ashburnham or to establish a home here.

Funds were also approved at the October 12, 2005 STM to study the relocation and reuse of the present Highway garage. By the start of 2006 a consultant had been secured and had begun work with the Focus Committee on this project.

The Planning Board and Planner are also conducting a comprehensive review of the Town's zoning and its potential for industrial/commercial development, and will propose many changes in 2006 that will both preserve the character of the community while still accommodating the inevitable growth that we face.

In closing this year's report I would like to note how fortunate I feel to have been chosen to serve as your Town Administrator, and how thoroughly I continue to enjoy the challenges of the position after nearly a year of service.

Ashburnham is blessed with an incredible group of volunteer board/committee members and its employee's are the finest in the region. It is truly a pleasure to work with all of these people on a daily basis.

I am especially blessed to work for and with a Board of Selectmen that is comprised of three outstanding individuals who care so deeply about their community and who work in such an amicable and therefore successful manner. I have commented on many occasions that in my 30 years of public service, I have never encountered a finer Board of Selectmen than the Board that currently serves this community. Every Ashburnham citizen should be proud of them and the Town government they lead.

And finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the Department Heads, their employees and the Town Hall staff with whom I work each day. These employees take tremendous pride in their work and are ever mindful of the trust placed in them to conduct the public's business with professionalism, impartiality and integrity. They succeed in that, and deserve your appreciation and respect for their service.

In that regard, no one deserves more recognition than the Secretary to the Selectmen and me, Sylvia Turcotte. She works tirelessly to ensure we are prepared for every meeting that the office functions smoothly and despite the very substantial responsibilities given her, she manages to maintain a sense of humor and incredibly upbeat demeanor. She is, quite simply a remarkable person and is the heart of our executive office.

Together with the Selectmen, volunteer board/committee members and the employees, we are proud to have served you this past year, and we look forward with great energy and optimism to the challenges of 2006. Thank-you.

Kevin E. Paicos
Town Administrator